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ABSTRACT

Educational research typically overlooks the significance of the superintendent in improvement efforts. The superintendent must not only be a good manager, but must also provide leadership, direction, vision, and purpose, and must establish an atmosphere conducive to learning. Because effective communication is vital, and in order to avoid confusion, the superintendent must also form an administrative team to maximize interaction and create commitment. One of the key elements of superintendent leadership is the search for effectiveness and excellence in the educational program. Effective leadership that produces effectiveness in schools can be accomplished only when the superintendent is fully organized and knowledgeable. The superintendent must evaluate the success or failure of improvement efforts, and be willing to abandon a project when necessary. Superintendents who wish to implement school reform are risk takers who view their job as requiring them to educate community and staff about what is needed and what they should want. This paper contains two figures mapping out superintendent activities and the superintendent's role in instituting reform efforts, and a list of 15 suggestions for superintendents. (KS)

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The Rural Superintendent:

The Missing Link in School Improvement

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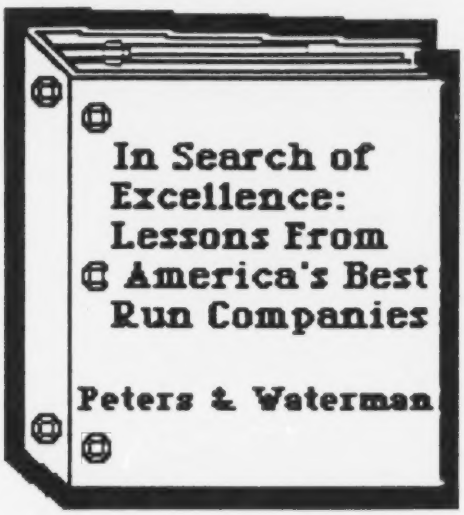
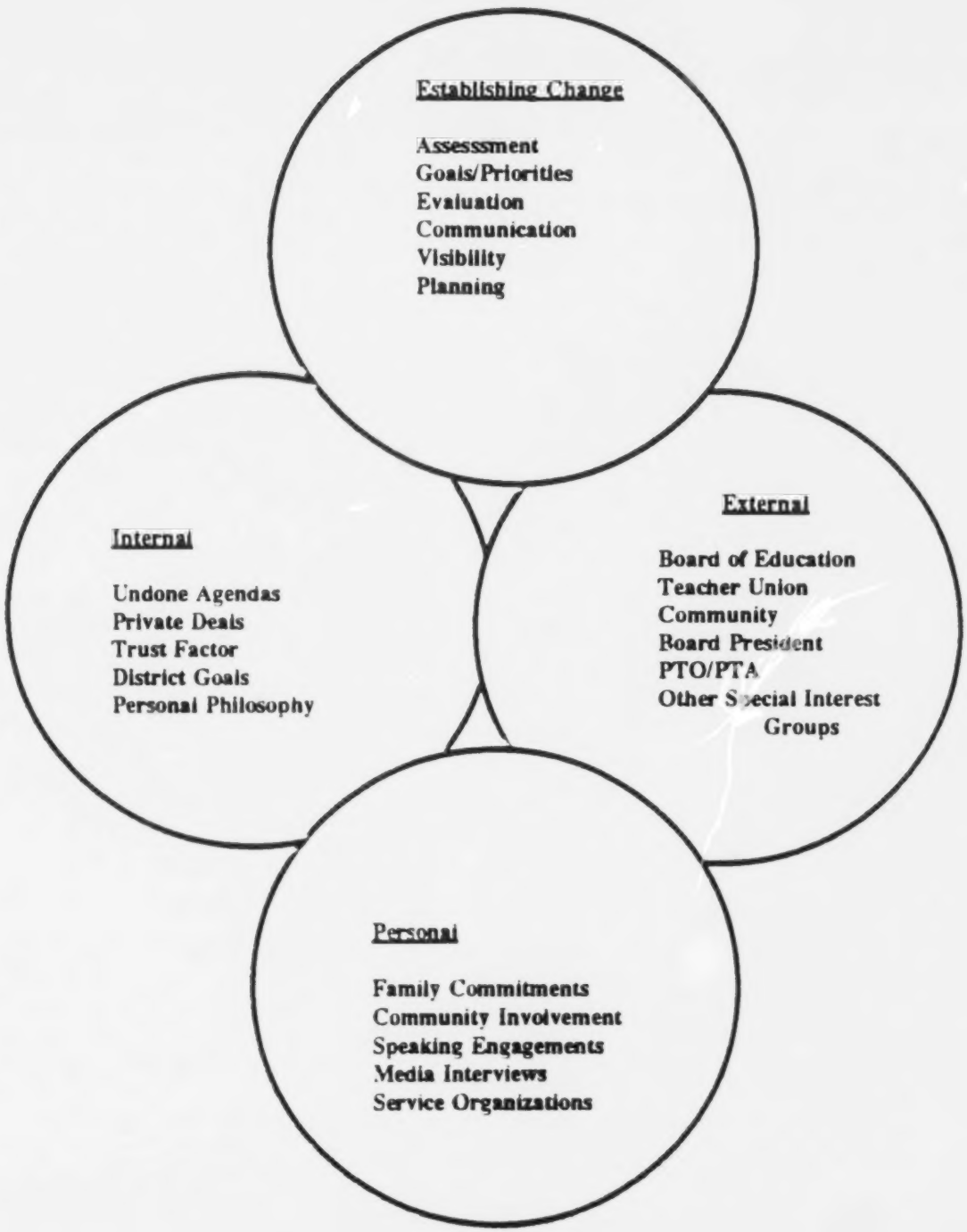
Although research recently has focused on district-wide improvement efforts, the role of the school superintendent is often unclear and ambiguous. This research has not fully identified school reform and change with a school superintendent; and although the attitudes of the superintendent about a planned change effort were a "signal" to teachers as to how seriously they should take a special project, educational research continues to overlook the significance of the role of the superintendent in improvement efforts.



It is somewhat ironic that while educational reformers have often looked to private industry for solutions to educational concerns and problems, and have often stressed the vital role and significance in reform efforts by private industries' chief executive officers, the role of the superintendent is ignored. Peters and Waterman's (1982) review and description of excellent companies has often been cited in the educational reform literature, and while we worship heroes of private industry like Lee Iacocca, Mary Kay Ashe, Ray Kroc, or even John DeLorean who are given credit for change, in education we disregard the school superintendent's potential role in change and school improvement.

Superintendent Activities

"Map Out the Terrain"



Active Leadership . . .

Research has indicated that an effective school leader is someone who is a visionary, with an understanding of what schools are all about and the ability to articulate that vision clearly and persistently through realistic goals and objectives. However, this leader must also have the ability to match task with talent, whether human or technical, align scarce resources with school needs, and use every opportunity to move a school closer to its vision. In addition, a leader must possess the self-discipline to evaluate fairly how objectives and resource management are working to support vision, coupled with an unyielding commitment to excellence, while communicating with a diversity of school interest groups. The real question for a superintendent of schools is how to not only build sound relationships, monitor school district information, coordinate activities, manage financial resources, maintain school facilities, direct support services and effectively staff these facilities, but also how to establish an atmosphere conducive to learning, how to provide instructional leadership, and how to effectively set high expectations and goals.

When we think about the position of superintendent of schools and all the work that a superintendent actually does - given the complexity of the position, time constraints and limitations and the community, board and staff demands- how can a superintendent adequately articulate the mission of the school district? Recent research has produced confusion concerning the principles of leadership, and often they are discussed as if they were the same. Although a school superintendent must be a good manager, he or she must provide leadership, direction, vision and purpose, and must establish an atmosphere conducive to change. Much preparation and planning is needed. Agendas must be developed, redeveloped, set and reset if a superintendent hopes to implement an effective school improvement program.

If the impetus for school improvement is going to be developed by a superintendent, then leadership activities are extremely important. How a thing is said is often more important than what is said; and effective communication with building administrators, teachers, board members, and community is vital. There are very few things more frustrating to a superintendent than to be misunderstood, particularly when the superintendent felt the communication or the action was clear cut and direct.

In order to avoid confusion, the superintendent must form an administrative team that will develop ways to maximize interaction and create commitment. One of the key elements of superintendent leadership is the search for effectiveness and excellence in the educational program. School improvement must be linked to

quality of student achievement. Careful listening to members of the staff as they discuss issues or areas of concern regarding change enables the superintendent to not only understand the point of view being made by these staff members, but also to begin to efficiently and effectively organize school improvement efforts.

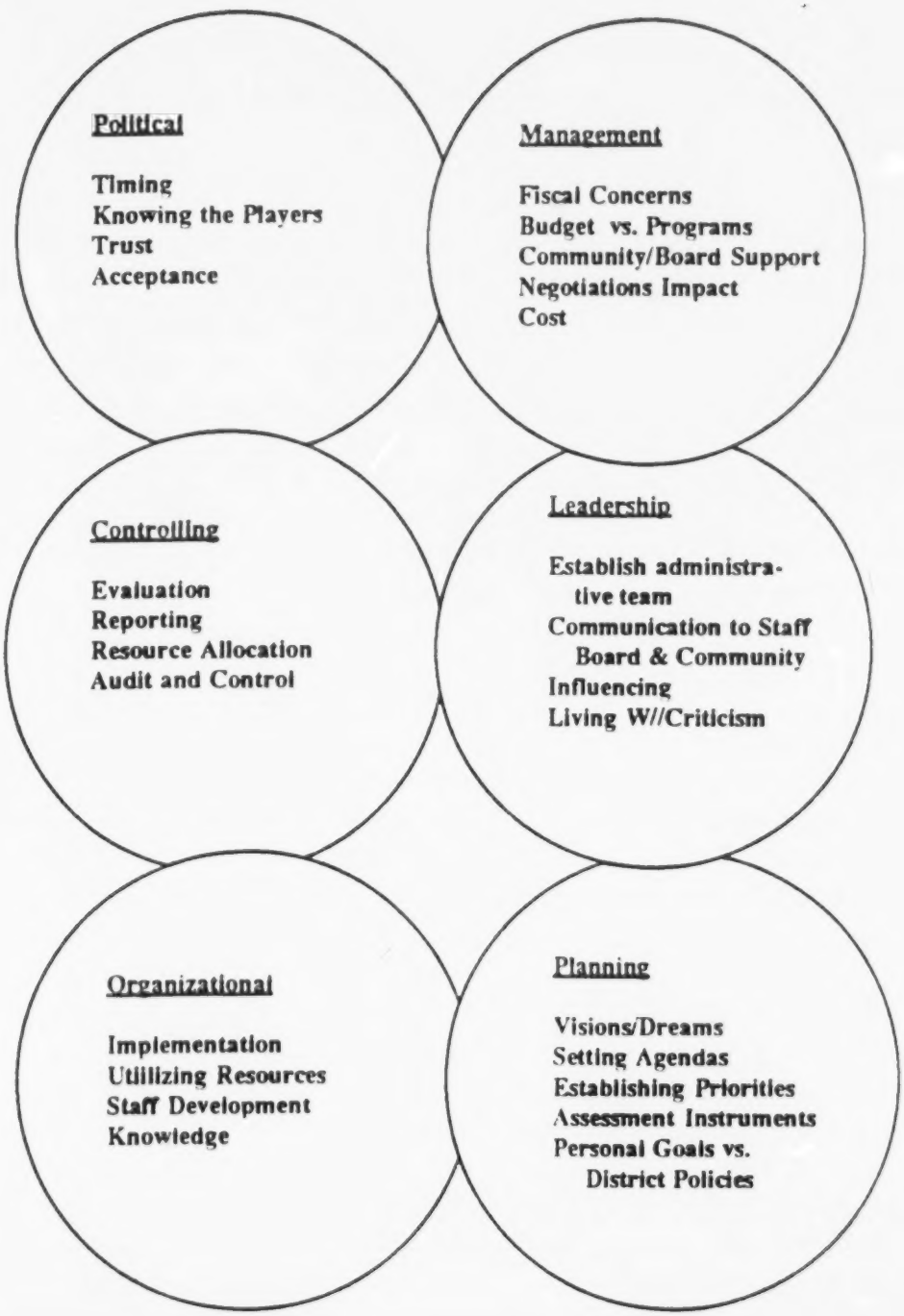
Effective leadership to produce effectiveness in schools can be accomplished only when the superintendent is fully organized and knowledgeable. A superintendent cannot bluff knowledge. Implementation of effective school reform requires a knowledge of how to efficiently utilize existing school resources and how to institute appropriate staff development activities.

If a school superintendent is committed to a school improvement effort, he or she must develop appropriate measures to evaluate the success or failure of such reform. Since criticism is indigenous to the superintendency, a superintendent, acting as a leader in school improvement, will often be the target for such criticism. Expectations or goals may have to be adjusted; and since change is a process that often requires the development of new skills, it cannot be accomplished overnight. Patience and the ability to hold one's ground against attack are important attributes. Progress reports to staff, board, and community are essential. However, a superintendent must be able to admit failure and be willing to abandon a project. A school superintendent knows when to stay and fight and when to run away. If retreat is in order, a school superintendent makes it appear that he or she is leading the parade and not running away from the mob.

Because a superintendent's daily role is complex, demanding, and often times full of conflict, it takes a special commitment by a superintendent to initiate and establish a school improvement effort. A superintendent must be prepared to spend ample time in planning, preparing, and paving the way for an improvement effort. There must be flexibility in setting agendas and establishing priorities.

One of the most important aspects of leadership is the personality of the leader; and therefore, a superintendent must be prepared to lead, organize, communicate, control and influence, if school reform is to occur. Timing is crucial, and a superintendent must know all the players, both inside and outside the school. Politics and questions of power must be analyzed and answered. Financial questions and concerns must be dealt with. While some superintendents view their job as maintaining the educational status quo and providing only those educational services that their community wants, superintendents who wish to implement school improvement are risk takers who view their job as requiring them to educate community and staff about what is needed and what they should want. They actively support reform that will raise expectations about student achievement and help to develop a process that commits staff and community to meet the goal of these expectations.

The Superintendent's Role
"Establishing Change"



Clearly, extensive research efforts have focused on the roles and activities of principals and teachers in enhancing effectiveness and effecting school improvement. However, very little attention has been paid to the role of the superintendent and the pivotal role he / she plays in instituting reform efforts, in giving legitimacy to the movement, and in assisting in the implementation that can often spell the difference between success and failure. Research on the superintendency has centered on demographic studies and have concentrated on the business management tasks performed by a superintendent. Others have concentrated on documenting a superintendent's daily functions. Political studies on how superintendents perform their jobs have centered on the relationships of superintendents and the local board of education or community groups. It appears that there has been a major shift from educational spokesperson and executive manager toward one where negotiation and conflict management of diverse interests and groups predominate.

Listed on the next two pages are suggested activities and guidelines that construe a leadership for improvement agenda that any superintendent can utilize.

For Your Consideration. . .

SOME SUGGESTIONS

1. Facilitate Participation: by creating a mechanism to gain the involvement of stakeholders.

2. Communicate - Share the Information: by doing so, trust and understanding is facilitated.

3. Empower Administrative Staff: research indicates that effective leadership resides at the building level, and so, some autonomy is needed.

4. Utilize Symbols for Tactical Advantages: this helps to encourage meaning and commitment, and helps convey the essence of the enterprise.

5. Capitalize on Opportunities: explore alternatives, be informed and prepared to seize the moment to promote school district goals.

6. Be Persistent: change takes time, and a good administrator must often consistently echo the same theme in order to gain acceptance of an objective or goal.

7. Credit Staff for Success: both privately and publicly for this increases confidence, motivation, and lets all know that performance counts.

(Suggestions Continued Next Page)

Suggestions continued. . .

8. Listen, Listen, Listen: good listeners are often seen as caring, concerned, and trustworthy - important characteristics for a leader.

9. Remember to Say "Thank You": respect and politeness to others is important, and will go a long way in making the difficult job of the superintendent easier.

10. Maintain Your Personal Image: model high standards, remember how things are perceived is often times more important than what is said or done.

11. Be Visible and Attainable: this invites feedback and helps foster communication.

12. Allow Messiness and Mistakes: remember, one often learns by doing and through experience.

13. Ignore the "Yes, but" Syndrome: don't get trapped into listening to these types of excuses, or in responding with the same.

14. Work for a Win-Win Situation: remember all issues are important to those who raise them, so compromise is crucial.

15. Remember, "The Buck Stops Here": a superintendent has the responsibility to administer the entire school district and must be prepared to make decisions.